



National historic register adds East Side's Wayland district

The area bounded by Blackstone Boulevard, Angell Street, South Angell Street, Arlington Avenue and President Avenue includes distinctive homes and important religious institutions.

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PROVIDENCE -- The Wayland Historic District on the East Side, considered a "well-preserved example of a century-old residential suburb" has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission said the following about the area:

The Wayland Historic District reflects the historic pattern of suburban development in Providence from the inception of the streetcar to the rise of the automobile. Wayland is also notable for its collection of late 19th- and early 20th-century houses, including 38 buildings designed by local architects. The 122-acre Wayland Historic District is bounded by Blackstone Boulevard, Angell Street, South Angell Street, Arlington Avenue and President Avenue. It encompasses 717 buildings including 3 churches, a synagogue, a fire station, 20 apartment buildings and hundreds of houses. The architecture represents an eclectic mix of late 19th-century and early 20th-century styles, including Queen Anne, Colonial Revival, Tudor Revival and Craftsman.

After the middle of the 19th century, increasing population and improvements in public transportation drove the development of the East Side. Families living in densely built areas near the center city desired to move to more spacious homes, while remaining close enough to commute to work. Developers offered "garden suburbs" with single-family houses in semi-rural settings on public transportation routes. The city's first street railway company began horse-car service in 1864, and service to the East Side was available within three years.

Later improvements included cable car service by 1890, conversion of the existing street railway network for electric trolleys by 1894, and introduction of new routes on Blackstone Boulevard by 1902 and Elmgrove Avenue by 1908.

The development of the Wayland Historic District got off to a slow start, then accelerated by the turn of the century. All of the land in the present-day district was located within the historic boundaries of the sprawling Moses Brown Farm.

In 1856, Brown's great-grandson received a portion of the property, and proceeded to divide much of the Moses Brown Farm into house lots. By 1875, just ten houses and five outbuildings were present, including the Rounds House (c. 1875) and Hoyt House (1873-74) on Humboldt Avenue, and the Browne House (1874) on Arlington Avenue. By 1882, there still was little residential development, though the principal streets of the district were laid out and the land was platted.

In 1891, developers created new streets with smaller lots. While most of the lots on the original streets of the Brown Farm Plat average 5,000 square feet in area, lots on the later streets average less than 4,000 square feet, resulting in a dense pattern of development typical of 19th-century streetcar suburbs. The exception to this pattern was Orchard Avenue, with its average lot sizes of more than 15,000 square feet. Orchard Avenue includes 13 houses, most of which were designed by prominent local architectural firms between 1890 and 1930. It also includes two of the East Side's most distinctive religious buildings: the neo-Gothic St. Martin's Episcopal Church (1916), designed by Clarke & Howe; and Temple Beth-El, (1951-54) designed by a master of modern synagogue design, Percival Goodman.

The Wayland Historic District was still sparsely populated in 1895, with residential development focused in the southern half of the district, because of proximity to municipal water lines and transportation. Commercial areas, like Wayland Square and the row of shops at the corner of Elmgrove and Lloyd avenues, sprang up along trolley lines. Also in the first decades of the 20th century, a series of neighborhood apartment buildings were erected in Wayland. The pace of residential construction increased after 1910, due in large part to the popularity of the automobile. Only scattered lots remained available for new construction by 1940.

"Unlike some other historic areas, Wayland does not need to be rediscovered or restored. The attractiveness of Wayland for homeowners today is largely due to the qualities of its architecture and landscape, which not only reflect the area's history but create the neighborhood setting for which it is justly appreciated," said Edward F. Sanderson, executive director of the heritage commission.

The commission said that properties on the National Register get special consideration during the planning of federal or federally assisted projects and are eligible for federal and Rhode Island tax benefits for historic rehabilitation projects.